THE LEGEND OF THE BLEEDING-HEART

By

Annie Fellows Johnston

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Olga, holding it in the hollow of her hands, offered him the water

The LEGEND OF THE BLEEDING-HEART

BY

ANNIE FELLOWS JOHNSTON

Author of "The Little Colonel Series," "Big Brother," "Joel: A Boy of Galilee," "Keeping Tryst," etc.

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IN MEMORY

OF THE ONES THAT GREW

SO LONG AGO,

IN OLD "Aunt Nancy's" GARDEN.

The Legend of the Bleeding-heart

IN days of old, when all things in the Wood had speech, there lived within its depths a lone Flax-spinner. She was a bent old creature, and ill to look upon, but all the tongues of all the forest leaves were ever kept a-wagging with the story of her

kindly deeds. And even to this day they sometimes whisper low among themselves (because they fain would hold in mind so sweet a tale) the story of her kindness to the little orphan, Olga.

'Twas no slight task the old Flax-spinner took upon herself, the day she brought the helpless child to share the shelter of her thatch.

The Oak outside her door held up his arms in solemn protest.

"Thou dost but waste thyself," he said. "Thy benefits will be forgot, thy labours unrequited. For Youth is ever but another title for Ingratitude."

"Nay, friend," the old Flax-spinner said. "My little Olga will not be ungrateful and forgetful."

All hedged about with loving care, the orphan grew to gracious maidenhood, and felt no lack of father, mother, brother or sister. In every way the old Flax-spinner took their places. But many were the sacrifices that she made to keep her fed and warmly clad, and every time she went without herself that Olga might receive a greater

share, Wiseacre Oak looked down and frowned and shook his head.

Then would the old dame hasten to her inner room, and there she pricked herself with her spindle, until a great red drop of her heart's blood fell into her trembling hand. With witchery of words she blew upon it, and rolled it in her palm, and muttering, turned and

turned and turned it. And as the spell was laid upon it, it shrivelled into a tiny round ball like a seed, and she strung it on a thread where were many others like it, saying, "By this she will remember. She will not be ungrateful and forgetful."

So years went by, and Olga grew in goodness and in beauty, and helped the old Flax-spinner in her tasks

as blithely and as willingly as if she were indeed her daughter. Every morning she brought water from the spring, gathered the wild fruits of the woods, and spread the linen on the grass to bleach. At such times would the bent old foster-mother hold herself erect, and call up to the Oak, "Dost see? Thou'rt wrong! Youth is *not* an-

other title for Ingratitude."

"Thou hast not lived as long as I," would be the only answer.

One day as Olga was wandering by the spring, searching for watercresses, the young Prince of the castle rode by on his prancing charger. A snow-white plume waved in his hat, and a shining silver bugle hung

from his shoulder, for he had been following the chase.

He was thirsty and tired, and asked for a drink, but there was no cup with which to dip the water from the spring. But Olga caught the drops as they bubbled out from the spring, holding them in the hollow of her beautiful white hands, and reaching up to where

he sat, offered him the sparkling water. So gracefully was it done, that the Prince was charmed by her modest manner as well as her lovely face, and baring his head when he had slaked his thirst, he touched the white hands with his lips.

Before he rode away he asked her name and where she lived. The next day a

courier in scarlet and gold stopped at the door of the cottage and invited Olga to the castle. Princesses and royal ladies from all over the realm were to be entertained there, seven days and seven nights. Every night a grand ball was to be given, and Olga was summoned to each of the balls. It was because of her pleasing manner and her great

beauty that she had been bidden.

The old Flax-spinner courtesied low to the courier and promised that Olga should be at the castle without fail.

"But, good dame," cried Olga, when the courier had gone, "prithee tell me why thou didst make such a promise, knowing full well this gown of tow is all I

own. Wouldst have me stand before the Prince in beggar's garb? Better to bide at home for aye than be put to shame before such guests."

"Have done, my child!" the old dame said. "Thou shalt wear a court robe of the finest. Years have I toiled to have it ready, but that is naught. I loved thee as my own."

Then once more the old Flax-spinner went into her inner room, and pricked herself with her spindle till another great red drop of her heart's blood fell into her trembling hand. With witchery of words she blew upon it, and rolled it in her palm, and muttering, turned and turned and turned it. And as the spell was laid upon it, it shrivelled into a

tiny round ball like a seed, and she strung it on to a thread, where were many others like it. Seventy times seven was the number of beads on this strange rosary.

When the night of the first ball rolled around, Olga combed her long golden hair and twined it with a wreath of snowy water-lilies, and then she stood before the

old dame in her dress of tow. To her wonderment and grief she saw there was no silken robe in waiting, only a string of beads to clasp around her white throat. Each bead in the necklace was like a little shrivelled seed, and Olga's eyes filled with tears of disappointment.

"Obey me and all will be well," said the old woman.

"When thou reachest the castle gate clasp one bead in thy fingers and say:

"'For love's sweet sake, in my hour of need,
Blossom and deck me, little seed.'

Straightway right royally shalt thou be clad. But remember carefully the charm. Only to the magic words, 'For love's sweet sake' will the necklace give up its treasures. If thou shouldst

forget, then thou must be doomed always to wear thy gown of tow."

So Olga sped on her moon-lighted way through the forest until she came to the castle gate. There she paused, and grasping a bead of the strange necklace between her fingers, repeated the old dame's charm:

"For love's sweet sake, in my hour of need,
Blossom and deck me, little seed."

Immediately the bead burst with a little puff as if a seed pod had snapped asunder. A faint perfume surrounded her, rare and subtle as if it had been blown across from some flower of Eden. Olga looked down and found herself enveloped in a robe of such delicate texture, that it seemed soft as a rose-leaf and as airy as pink clouds

that sometimes float across the sunset. The water-lilies in her hair had become a coronal of opals.

When she entered the great ball-room, the Prince of the castle started up from his throne in amazement. Never before had he seen such a vision of loveliness. "Surely," said he, "some rose of Paradise hath found a soul and drifted earthward

to blossom here." And all that night he had eyes for none but her.

The next night Olga started again to the castle in her dress of tow, and at the gate she grasped the second bead in her fingers, repeating the charm. This time the pale yellow of the daffodils seemed to have woven itself into a cloth of gold for her adorning. It

was like a shimmer of moon-beams, and her hair held the diamond flashings of a hundred tiny stars.

That night the Prince paid her so many compliments and singled her out so often to bestow his favours, that Olga's head was turned. She tossed it proudly, and quite scorned the thought of the humble cottage which had given her shelter so

long. The next day when she had returned to her gown of tow and was no longer a haughty court lady, but only Olga, the Flax-spinner's maiden, she repined at her lot. Frowning, she carried the water from the spring. Frowning, she gathered the cresses and plucked the woodland fruit. And then she sat all day by the spring, refusing to

spread the linen on the grass to bleach.

She was discontented with the old life of toil, and pouted crossly because duties called her when she wanted to do nothing but sit idly dreaming of the gay court scenes in which she had taken a bright brief part. The old Flax-spinner's fingers trembled as she spun, when she saw the

frowns, for she had given of her heart's blood to buy happiness for this maiden she loved, and well she knew there can be no happiness where frowns abide. She felt that her years of sacrifice had been in vain, but when the Oak wagged his head she called back waveringly, "My little Olga will not be ungrateful and forgetful!"

That night outside the castle gate, Olga paused. She had forgotten the charm. The day's discontent had darkened her memory as storm-clouds darken the sky. But she grasped her necklace imperiously.

"Deck me at once!" she cried in a haughty tone. "Clothe me more beautifully than mortal maid was

ever clad before, so that I may find favour in the Prince's sight and become the bride of the castle! I would that I were done for ever with the spindle and the distaff!"

But the moon went under a cloud and the wind began to moan around the turrets. The black night hawks in the forest flapped their wings warningly, and the

black bats flitted low around her head.

"Obey me at once!" she cried angrily, stamping her foot and jerking at the necklace. But the string broke, and the beads went rolling away in the darkness in every direction and were lost — all but one, which she held clasped in her hand.

Then Olga wept at the

castle gate; wept outside in the night and the darkness, in her peasant's garb of tow. But after awhile through her sobbing, stole the answering sob of the night wind.

"Hush-sh!" it seemed to say. "Sh-sh! Never a heart can come to harm, if the lips but speak the old dame's charm."

The voice of the night

wind sounded so much like the voice of the old Flax-spinner, that Olga was startled and looked around wonderingly. Then suddenly she seemed to see the thatched cottage and the bent form of the lonely old woman at the wheel. All the years in which the good dame had befriended her seemed to rise up in a row, and out of each one called

a thousand kindnesses as with one voice: "How canst thou forget us, Olga? We were done for love's sweet sake, and that alone!"

Then was Olga sorry and ashamed that she had been so proud and forgetful, and she wept again. The tears seemed to clear her vision, for now she saw plainly that through no power of her own could she wrest

strange favours from fortune. Only the power of the old charm could make them hers. She remembered it then, and holding fast the one bead in her hand, she repeated humbly:

"For love's sweet sake, in my hour of need,
Blossom and deck me, little seed."

Lo, as the words left her lips, the moon shone out from behind the clouds

above the dark forest. There was a fragrance of lilies all about, and a gossamer gown floated around her, whiter than the whiteness of the fairest lily. It was fine like the finest lace the frost-elves weave, and softer than the softest ermine of the snow. On her long golden hair gleamed a coronet of pearls.

So beautiful, so dazzling

was she as she entered the castle door, that the Prince came down to meet her, and kneeling, kissed her hand and claimed her as his bride. Then came the bishop in his mitre, and led her to the throne, and before them all the Flax-spinner's maiden was married to the Prince, and made the Princess Olga.

Then until the seven days

and seven nights were done, the revels lasted in the castle. And in the merriment the old Flax-spinner was again forgotten. Her kindness of the past, her loneliness in the present had no part in the thoughts of the Princess Olga.

All night the old Oak, tapping on the thatch, called down, "Thou'rt forgotten! Thou'rt forgotten!"

But the beads that had rolled away in the darkness, buried themselves in the earth, and took root, and sprang up, as the old woman knew they would do. There at the castle gate they bloomed, a strange, strange flower, for on every stem hung a row of little bleeding hearts.

One day the Princess Olga, seeing them from her

window, went down to them in wonderment.

"What do you here?" she cried, for in her forest life she'd learned all speech of bird and beast and plant.

"We bloom for love's sweet sake," they answered. "We have sprung from the old Flax-spinner's gift — the necklace thou didst break and scatter. From her

heart's best blood she gave it, and her heart still bleeds to think she is forgotten."

Then they began to tell the story of the old dame's sacrifices, all the seventy times seven that she had made for the sake of the maiden, and Olga grieved as she listened, that she could have been so ungrateful. Then she brought the

Prince to hear the story of the strange, strange flowers, and when he had heard, together they went to the lowly cottage and fetched the old Flax-spinner to the castle, there to live out all her days in ease and contentment.

"See now," she whispered to the Oak at parting, but sturdily he held his ground, persisting, "Thou *wouldst*

have been forgotten, save for that miracle of bloom."

And still the flower we call BLEEDING-HEART blooms on by cottage walls and castle gardens, to waken all the world to grateful memories. And ever it doth bring to mind the lonely hearts that bleed because they are forgotten, and

all they sacrificed for love's sweet sake, to give us happiness.

THE END.

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